

Using Social Media to Facilitate Collaboration

Consider this scenario: You're running a grant and have been tasked with forming or expanding a collaboration to support your prevention efforts. Perhaps you're new to the job and don't know where to start. Or maybe you've been working in the field for a while, but feel like you've already tapped all of your professional contacts. How do you go about finding local folks who can join your effort? What is the best way to reach out to people you don't know? And how can you spread the word about your collaboration, once you have the right people on board?

The answer is something you might already be using every day: social media.

Social media offers prevention practitioners ready access to a wealth of free, easily accessible tools and platforms to showcase their work, highlight their expertise, and share the details of their efforts. But more importantly, social media offers practitioners a chance to both lead and participate in discussions on a range of critical prevention issues, providing an easy way to connect with current and potential partners, as well as current and potential funders and community stakeholders. It's this interactivity that makes the platforms so crucial to successful collaboration.

This tool offers an introduction to the role that social media can play in building and growing public health collaborations. Specifically, it will explore the differences between personal and professional social media use, factors to consider prior to using social media for collaboration, and finally, concrete tips for maximizing the benefits of this exciting approach.

Social Media: A Professional Engagement Tool

If you are like 65% of American adults,¹ you probably have many friends, followers, and connections through your personal social media accounts. *Social media* is an umbrella term applied to a group of online and electronic tools that include blogs, social networking sites, and video-sharing sites.² Unlike early websites, where the main focus was to deliver information in a closed, one-way manner, social media tools prioritize engagement, mainly through creating and sharing user-generated content and the timely exchange of news and information.

With a focus on interaction, discussion, and easy access to people and organizations around the world, social media is an invaluable tool for facilitating public health collaboration. In many ways, using social media for public health collaboration looks a lot like personal social media use. In both, the focus is on connecting with like-minded people and leveraging online connections into real world connections or action. The most innovative public health professionals understand and capitalize on this similarity.

Yet it is also important to understand how personal and professional social media use differs. Some of the core distinctions are presented in Table 1, below. Failure to understand these differences can cause new users to the world of professional social media to struggle right out of the gate.

Table 1: Personal vs. Professional Social Media Use: How Do They Differ?

Consideration	Personal	Professional
Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Limited Access: How can I limit the number of people who see this? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Open Access: How can I increase the number of people who see this?
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People you know (friends/family) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People you do and don't know
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Content reflects on you as an individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Content reflects on you as a professional, on your partners' organizations, and on your collaboration as a whole
Message Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anything of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Must stay on message—that is, all messages should strategically meet the goals of your collaboration

Getting Started

So how do you begin? What do you need to think about before reaching out to potential collaborators? How will you know if your efforts are successful? The first step is to make a plan. One of the biggest mistakes practitioners often make is to jump right in without a plan.

Table 2, below, presents some important questions to consider prior to establishing a social media presence. Use them to initiate conversations with both colleagues and collaborators about your social media thoughts and plans. The resources included in the “Where to Go to Learn More” column can help you answer many of the questions posed. These resources are geared toward the public health social media user and are available in the public domain.

Table 2: Considerations for Getting Started

Question	Related Considerations	Where to Go to Learn More
Are We Ready to Establish a Presence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do we have the technology we need? ▪ Do we have the person power? ▪ Do we have an online audience? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Assessing Readiness to Use Social Media for Prevention:</i> http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/readiness-social-media-prevention
Who, What, Where, and How?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Who</i> are our target audiences? ▪ <i>What</i> do we want to say? ▪ <i>Where</i> can we reach our audience (i.e., which platforms do they prefer?) ▪ <i>How</i> do we set up and use accounts on our chosen platforms? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Developing a Social Media Plan to Support Substance Misuse Prevention Efforts:</i> https://preventionsolutions.edc.org/services/resources/developing-social-media-plan-support-substance-misuse-prevention-efforts
Are There Rules We Need to Follow?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does our organization have rules we need to follow related to social media use? Do our collaborators? ▪ Does our collaboration need to create its own unique policies? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enterprise Social Media Policy (sample policy):</i> http://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/pdf/social-media-policy.pdf
What Do We Want Our Account to Say About Us?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do we want people to know about our collaboration? ▪ What message(s) should our audience(s) take away from our content? ▪ What “tone” (e.g., friendly, research-oriented) will we use? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>CDC’s Guide to Writing for Social Media:</i> http://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/guideforwriting.html

Table 2: Considerations for Getting Started (cont.)

Question	Related Considerations	Where to Go to Learn More
Whose Account Is It Anyway?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who has permission to create content or post updates? ▪ How can we share responsibility for the account among our partners? ▪ How can we ensure that content is posted in a consistent manner and tone? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Creating Your Social Media Plan:</i> http://www.slideshare.net/CDCNPIN/in-the-know-ii-creating-your-social-media-plan
How Are We Doing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How will we measure our success? ▪ Are we reaching the right people? ▪ How has our audience grown and changed since we started? ▪ How is our social media presence helping (or hurting) the work of our collaboration? ▪ How can we use our evaluation data to sustain our social media presence? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Guide to Evaluating Social Media Efforts:</i> http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/evaluating-social-media-efforts

Use the accompanying worksheet, [*Effective Social Media Planning*](#), to share these planning questions with your partners. Feel free to personalize the planning steps to meet the needs and goals of your group.

Maximizing the Benefits

Your accounts are set up. You have a plan in place for posting content. Perhaps you’ve created a policy to guide your efforts. You understand the importance of evaluating your approach. So how can you make the best use of social media to strengthen your collaboration? Here are five opportunities:

1. Use It to *Actively Engage Potential Partners*

There are *many* potential collaborators on social media likely to share your prevention goals, including representatives from national, state, and local prevention organizations, lawmakers, community leaders, socially engaged research professors, and savvy local community members who might be looking for a way to take their online activism into the real world. Social media provides the opportunity to go beyond passively following the updates from potential partners; users can actively connect and engage with these colleagues on a regular basis.

How?

- Conduct a keyword search on social media platforms to identify people and organizations that are currently working in your area of interest. Many platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) use hashtags to categorize posted content; public health professionals often use hashtags to categorize work efforts in a health area (see example below). Message or tweet partners to express your interest in their work.
- Participate in social media chats or events on topics of interest, and engage with fellow event participants when doing so.
- Find out who your prevention colleagues are following or connected with, then connect with them as well. Using these personal referrals is a great way to expand your social media network.

Example: To address the growing opioid epidemic, public health professionals, health organizations, policymakers, and concerned members of the public have taken to Twitter to share information, intervention efforts, and policy proposals. For example, searching for [#opioidepidemic](#) on Twitter shows all tweets pertaining to the issue, with links to new research and data, policy proposals, and personal stories from community members who have been affected by the opioid crisis and want to get involved in real world activism.

2. Use It to Collect Real-time Feedback

Social media are intended to support multi-way, interactive communication. Because of this, they are the ideal platforms for learning about community needs, programs in development or underway, and available resources—and for sharing this information with others.

How?

- Use social media to disseminate information and resources to your target audiences.
- Pose questions to your audience and invite feedback (e.g., “How useful are our programs for addressing training needs in your community?”)
- Share interesting content from other sources with your audience. Social media makes re-sharing content easy. Encourage your followers to share or retweet your messages to a new and wider audience.

TIP #1

An easy way to connect with a large number of professionals who share your interests is to participate in a Twitter chat. Choose a chat on a topic relevant to your work, get online, and then make sure to introduce yourself and your collaboration—including where you're from. You're likely to find many professionals in your area eager to reach out and connect with you!

TIP #2

Respond to comments and questions in a timely and personal manner. If posting on behalf of your organization or other group, consider including your initials to personalize your response and to put a name to your reply.

Example: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) *Invent Health* initiative seeks to empower inventors both inside and outside government to create tools for better living and clinical care. HHS actively solicits solutions to health problems through multiple social media platforms, including an [interactive blog](#) and a [popular Twitter account](#) that has attracted more than 17,000 followers.

3. Use It to Create Opportunities for Followers to Support Your Efforts and Connect with One Another

Social media are a great venue for community building because they can facilitate broad, deep, and ongoing interaction and engagement with various audiences. You can strengthen your online community by both engaging with your followers and encouraging them to connect with each other.

How?

- Host live chats or other events on topics of interest and invite your social media followers to participate.
- Invite followers with specific expertise to contribute to your communication efforts (e.g., ask them to write a guest post to your blog).
- Get to know your followers and refer them to organizations, individuals, and resources that match their areas of interest.

TIP #3

Provide personalized referrals. For example, write: "Follower A, you should meet Follower B. She's leading a similar effort in New Jersey and has recently published the evaluation data."

Example: In 2012, two prevention practitioners with a shared interest in social media and public health founded Public Health Talks. The duo hosts an interactive monthly Twitter chat on popular and emerging public health topics and invites members of its social media community to join in various roles—as participants, guest facilitators, and guest experts. The account ([@PubHealthTalks](#)) has more than 3,300 followers.

4. Use It to Create Opportunities to Integrate On- and Offline Engagement

Translating online discussions into offline relationships can broaden the scope of your potential partnerships and collaborations. In addition, by providing an online component to in-person events, you give your followers the opportunity to participate regardless of financial or geographic barriers.

How?

- Encourage participants to live-tweet your group's events using a unique hashtag (e.g., #ABC2016) that can be tracked by your social media followers.
- Host in-person meet-ups for your social media followers.

Example: At the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association (APHA), organizers recognize the importance of having their growing number of public health social media users meet face-to-face. So each year they organize a “meet-up” during the annual meeting, enabling online users to take their conversations into the real world and deepen their friendships and partnerships offline.

5. Use It to Build Your Credibility as a Vehicle for Change

You want to stand out! In a sea of individual and organizational accounts (e.g., Twitter has 310 million monthly active users) it’s important to establish yourself as a credible group that is a leader in your field.³

How?

- Stay on top of trends (e.g., new data, peer-reviewed publications, and funding opportunities) by conducting keyword or hashtag searches on specific topics of interest. This will produce a results list that includes all social media posts or accounts that mention those keywords and topics. Regularly review these results with your group and take action (e.g., contact a local organization that has launched a new program related to your group’s mission).
- Develop and disseminate social media messages that are accurate, consistent, and evidence-based.⁴
- Share information about your past and current initiatives in order to establish a track record of leadership in your field.

Example: Long known among academics as a respected leader in population-level research, the Pew Research Center has broadened their audience through use of Twitter. Their feed is interactive and consistently posts updated content and new research data. Pew’s Twitter account ([@pewresearch](#)) has over 268,000 followers and research reports quickly become viral as they are reposted and discussed across social media.

At no other point in history have there been so many no-cost and easy ways to reach others. As it has done for the way we connect in our personal lives, social media will undoubtedly change the landscape of public health collaboration and engagement!

TIP #4

Plan an in-person networking event for your social media followers. Host it in a location local to your group or where many of your followers will already be present (e.g., an academic conference). The event should encourage new partnerships to emerge and allow time for brainstorming how social media can continue to advance the mission of your group.

TIP #5

Engage with those who are posting the newest data and research. Share or re-tweet their findings and congratulate them on bringing attention to an important issue. Ask clarifying questions of potential funders. Become known as a collaborative group that values new and current information.

References

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